

UNIVERSITY OF YORK

EVIDENCE OF THE VIKING RELIGION

THROUGH

ARCHAEOLOGY

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THE VIKINGS

At the end of the eighth and the beginning of the ninth centuries, Europe was very different from the current one. The Western Roman Empire had fallen several centuries ago; in the region of the current France were taking steps that would later lead to the powerful Carolingian Empire; in England, the Anglo-Saxon Heptarchy ruled the island as they fought against each other to secure their power and the Byzantine Empire faced the siege of Avars, Slavs and Persians while trying to regain its former glory. It was at this juncture that happened what has been commonly called "second barbarian invasions". These "invasions" were composed mainly by the Magyars, who would harshly attack lands of the Ottonians, and Muslims, that dominated in just a few decades all North Africa and the Iberian peninsula. Another people was also introduced at this time at the international scene; people belonging to the regions of Scandinavia who would leave a large imprint in history: the Vikings. Today, thanks to the work performed by historians, archaeologists and other researchers, we have lots of information about this people. To a greater or lesser extent, we have knowledge about their expeditions, their way of life, the trade performed with the rest of the world, their society, culture and, of course, their religious beliefs.

Old Norse religion (the conventional name of the religious traditions in Scandinavia before the conversion to Christianity in the tenth and eleventh centuries) was a collection of beliefs and stories shared by the Northern Germanic peoples (Insoll, 2011). It was not a revelatory religion, because there was not a truth given by the divine to mortals and it did not have a holy book but it was orally transmitted in the form of a long and regular poetry. It was a polytheistic religion formed by a pantheon of gods who personified forces of nature, and other concepts such as war, harmony, friendship and wisdom. It played a key role in Viking society since in many aspects of its life, it defined its way to act, think and proceed. However, despite its great importance for

understanding this people, the majority of the information and knowledge we have about Viking religion are thanks to written sources (as in the case of many other aspects of the Vikings).

In this particular case, the main sources written about Norse religion are the medieval texts written during or after the Christianization of Scandinavia by Christians referring back to their pagan past or by foreigners in ethnographic perspectives. Perhaps the most important are the texts known as the *Eddas*, which were two medieval Icelandic literary collections related to Norse mythology and that together form the corpus that is most important to know Scandinavian religion (Fig. 1 ).



Fig. 1. Title page of a manuscript of the *Prose Edda*, showing Odin, Heimdall, Sleipnir and other figures from Norse mythology. From the 18th century Icelandic manuscript, now in the care of the Icelandic National Library. (Archaeology in Europe web)

The first *Edda* summarizes the mythological world. Known as *Prosaic Edda* or *Snorri's Edda*, was written in the early thirteenth century by the Icelandic chieftain and

poet Snorri Sturlusson (1179–1241). Several mythological poems, probably from the time of the conversion, are preserved in the second *Edda*, known as *Poetic Edda*, which was written down and edited in the early thirteenth century. Other texts which have many links to Old Norse religion are the German poem *Nibelungenlied* and the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*.

It was in the Romantic period, in the first decades of the nineteenth century, with a recognition that the gods and goddesses represented a non-Christian religion and an alternative northern heritage to the dominant classical tradition in Europe at that time, when we see the origins of the study of Norse Religion. During the next years, many of the gods and goddesses belonging to the Norse mythology were depicted in sculptures and painting. Squares and streets, journals and private firms bore their names. As we can see, there was an evident increasing interest for the Norse religion. In fact, in 1876, the Danish archaeologist Henry Petersen performed the first comprehensive investigation about this topic being the first one of many. Nevertheless, the use of the Norse mythology by the pan-Germanic movement in Nazi Germany caused that research about Old Norse and Germanic religion nearly disappeared after the Second World War. In any case, although archaeology was reduced in those years to a means of illustrating phenomena already known from written documents, in these last decades, it has begun to play a more active role in this field and, it seems that, in these last decades, the interest and the study about this topic is newly increasing (Insoll, 2011).

Despite the fact that historians and documentary historians are those who have brought more light on this complex topic through the use of the above mentioned written sources, what role did archaeology played? Archaeology has made it possible to "touch" and "perceive" all that mythology. Thanks to it, the Norse religion are not only

long lines written but something tangible. In summary, it allows us to be witnesses at the forefront of those beliefs.

There are numerous useful material sources to increase our knowledge of Norse religion and the importance that had for those people, generally located or found in Scandinavia, other regions of the Baltic Sea and in the North of the United Kingdom. These material sources include from artefacts found in archaeological sites or burials, and places of worship, carvings in stone or wood, etc.

When it comes to use the source materials for the study of Norse religion, carvings in crosses and tombstones of the early Christian period in Scandinavian "ironically" have an important place. These carvings show images of the Nordic gods and representations of their myths. Apparently, with the aim of introducing Christianity among the people of the North, comparisons between the Nordic myths and the Christian religion were made, in order to make it more accessible and comprehensible to the population (Davidson, 1993). To a certain extent, they were also made to represent the triumph of Christianity over the pagan religions. These carvings, may be questionable since most of them were executed by Christian creed individuals. Perhaps such individuals did not have a broad or exact knowledge about the Nordic religion which would induce errors, but faced with this dilemma, Davidson argues that "It may be assumed that such mythological scenes were once carved earlier in wood to decorate the halls of rich men and to enrich the shrines of the gods, since there are allusions to such carvings in early Icelandic poems" (Davidson, 1993, 50). Good examples of carvings about Nordic religious content are found in places such as Andreas in the Isle of Man. Thorwald's Cross dated to the eleventh century and located there, shows in one side, how Odin is being devoured by the wolf in the last great battle (see Fig. 2). This

scene makes reference to the Viking Apocalypse, also known as Ragnarok, where the great wolf *Fenris*, defeat and devour Odin. The god can be identified since is accompanied by his common symbols such as the raven on his shoulder, his spear and a characteristic knot often associated with him (Davidson, 1993). However, the other side shows a figure holding a cross in his left hand and a book in his right (see Fig 3). There is also a fish, an unequivocal symbol of Christ. This figure, presumably representing Christianity, along with the Odin's death scene, pretends to show the victory of Christianity and the end of the pagans religions.



Fig. 2 and 3. Both sides of Thorwald's Cross. (Archaeology in Europe web)

Thor was another god of high status in the Nordic pantheon who has being perpetuated in several carvings throughout the Viking age. Generally, these carvings make reference to his fight against the World Serpent *Jörmundgander* in the Ragnarok and when he was obtaining fish for the giant Hymer's feast. Among the Thor's fishing carving there is a good example in the Altuna stone in Sweden, dated to the early



eleventh century. This stone is really relevant because it is characterized by the fact that there is no evidence that it was a Christian monument and because only

Thor appears on it. In the myth, Thor was fishing along with the giant Hymer and it is unusual to find carvings with him alone. The stone shows Thor with the hammer *Mjólnir* in one hand and a fishing pole with the head of an ox as a bait in the other hand. Under him, the World Serpent *Jörmundgander* struggles to break free (see Fig. 4).

Another key piece in the study of Norse religion is Ardre stone in Gotlandia. On top of the stone is a scene with Odin on his eight-legged horse Sleipner, probably approaching Valhalla, where a Valkyrie (female warrior) is holding a drinking cup. In the middle panel is a representation of the story of Wayland the smith, who has just decapitated two royal sons in his smithy, and is fleeing in the disguise of a bird (Insoll, 2011). The Stone is a perfect illustrated handbook about the



Fig. 4. Thor's fishing. Altuna Stone.  
(Runes'n'ruins web)

concept of the afterlife that had the Vikings since it shows the ascent to Valhalla, event of great significance to cultural and religious level among them. Valhalla was a huge and majestic hall located in the city of Asgard. Chosen by Odin, half of those killed in combat travelled to Valhalla after their death guided by the Valkyries, while the other half went to the goddess Freyja's Fólkvangr. This stone is therefore a key evidence about the Nordic beliefs related the afterlife (at least in the case of those who have fallen in battle). But, perhaps the fact that this stone is dated in the 9th century, is one of the



Fig. 5. Ardre Stone, Gotland. (Runes'n'ruins web)

most remarkable features since it indicates that this stone was made at a time in which Christianity was barely known and yet it had not been introduced in Scandinavia. In other words, it did not influence in any way in the manufacture of the carving



Archaeology has also provided other elements that help us greatly to understand the weight of the Norse religion among the inhabitants of the North. These elements are all those artefacts recovered, mainly in graves and settlements, that either are or have symbols and evidence of Viking religion.

Previously, Thor and his role in Viking mythology was slightly mentioned. While Odin was regarded as a warrior god and often violent, Thor was rather considered by the Vikings as the protector of the cosmos and, by extension, of the mankind. These titles, made him a closer god than Odin. In fact, tales of Thor in the later literature represent him as a loved and popular deity (Davidson, 1993). Therefore, it is logical that many artefacts related to Thor have been recovered in Viking settlements. Among all the symbols associated with the god, the most significant was undoubtedly his hammer. *Mjólnir*, as it was called, became the main symbol chosen by all those who wished to show their relationship with the god. The most common example are the pendants that, albeit varied in shape and size, had the form of hammer (see Fig. 6 and 7).

Nevertheless, Thor's hammer is not the only symbol that we find among the Viking population. As it has been previously said, Norse mythology included a large number of deities, spiritual and mystical beings, etc. As in the case of Thor, many individuals possessed another kind of symbols which pointed their supernatural allegiances with these other gods and beings. The variety of these artefacts is immense; some of them were made as rings of fire-steels, or miniature items (see Fig. 8, 9 and 10) such as spears, sickles, arrows, staves and shields. Others were three-dimensional figurines with anthropomorphic form representing deities and beings (see Fig. 11). Just a few can be securely linked to named deities or beings. (Williams, Pentz and Wemhoff, 2014).

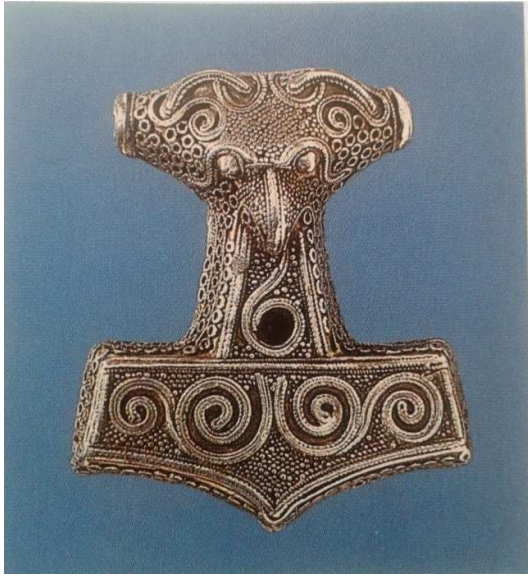


Fig. 6. Silver Thor's hammer, Skåne, Sweden.  
(Roesdahl and Wilson, 1992, 190)



Fig. 7. Thor's hammer pendant, 900-950.  
Vålse, Falster, Denmark. (Williams, Pentz,  
Wemhoff and Kleingärtner, 2014, 172)



Fig. 8. Miniature pendant  
sword, 800-1050.  
Kalmergården, north-west  
Zealand, Denmark.  
(Williams, Pentz, Wemhoff  
and Kleingärtner, 2014, 173)



Fig. 9. Shield-shaped  
pendant, 800-1050.  
Nørholm, northern Jutland,  
Denmark. (Williams, Pentz,  
Wemhoff and Kleingärtner,  
2014, 173)



Fig. 10. Miniature hafted  
axe, 800-1050. Avnsøgård,  
Avnsø, north-west Zealand,  
Denmark. (Williams, Pentz,  
Wemhoff and Kleingärtner,  
2014, 173)



Fig. 11. Figurine, possibly a Valkyrie, c. 800.  
Hårby, Funen, Denmark. (Williams, Pentz,  
Wemhoff and Kleingärtner, 2014, 173)

Even though the Viking burials are scarce in England, in Heath Wood, at south-west of Repton, we find several burials where there is presence of religious artefacts. One of them, considered the earliest one, was composed by several grave goods and the deceased, a man aged at least 35-40 who had been killed by massive cut on the head of his left femur. The grave good was composed by artefacts such as glass beads, iron artefacts (sword, knife and key) and a copper alloy belt buckle. However, there are other artefacts which are charged with such religious importance.

The Viking religion was very different to the current religions, it would not be even proper to call it religion since it was rather a set of beliefs and customs that affected the behaviour of the Nordic population. Likewise, when we talk about Norse religion, it is not correct to think about churches and other structures where the faithful gathered to worship their deities. Nevertheless, according to written sources, there were two types of ritual places. One of them were the *hörgr* which were enclosed spaces or small buildings where the rites were performed, while the others were sacred shrines known as *vé*. Currently, there is an important debate about the true nature or even the

existence of these buildings of cult, but archaeologists have found evidence that support the written sources. We can see such evidence at sites such as Götavi in Närke (Sweden) where after performed a series of archaeological excavations, they found under a layer of clay, in the middle of a seemingly unoccupied area, nine parallel lines of stone packings which had been laid out (see Fig. 12). Along with the fact that Götavi means the 'Gods' vé and that the number nine had a mystical power in the Norse thought-world, there were other evidence that this site was used as area of cult. Apparently, numerous animal and perhaps human sacrifices were performed there due to the large amount of blood which, thanks to the chemical analysis, we know was spilled in the place. We also found evidence of many fires around the place whose aim was theoretically to create a smokescreen to conceal what happened within (Williams, Pentz and Wemhoff, 2014).



Fig. 12. Possible sacred shrine or vé. Götavi in Närke (Sweden) (Williams, Pentz, Wemhoff and Kleingärtner, 2014, 169)

In conclusion, it is evident that archaeology has a great weight when it comes to understanding the Norse religion. Thanks to it we can ascertain and see with our own eyes how that mythology, cited in the Eddas centuries later of its "conception", truly existed in the minds of those people and played a fundamental role in their life in aspects such as death, war, or the simple day-to-day. Numerous vestiges, apart from those mentioned in this essay, are proof of this.

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## OTHER RESOURCES

### Websites

Archaeology in Europe: <http://www.archeurope.com>

Runes'n'ruins: <http://www.runesnruins.com>